



THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF
ROBERT HAROLD COMPTON (6/8/1886—11/7/1979)
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July the 3rd 1979 was an unusually mild winter's day in Cape Town. Taking advantage of the warm sunshine, Prof. Compton lunched at the Kirstenbosch restaurant before proceeding to the herbarium, where he spent part of that afternoon chatting to the staff and casting an approving eye over some newly acquired cabinets. During the past few

years we had become accustomed to these periodic visits. Though nearing his 93rd birthday, 'Cummy', as he was affectionately known, found much satisfaction in lunching at Kirstenbosch, after which he would spend an hour or two in the herbarium, taking his pleasure among the specimens and books he had so painstakingly gathered together. But we had no inkling that this was to be his last visit to Kirstenbosch, for he died suddenly in Cape Town, eight days later, after a brief bout of pneumonia. His passing ended a lifetime of distinguished and devoted service to Kirstenbosch, as well as to the whole cause of botany in South Africa.

He accomplished more than most men can ever hope to fulfil in a lifetime. A scintillating academic career at Cambridge was followed by a year of fundamental botanical exploration in New Caledonia, then (1914) still very much *terra incognita*, botanically speaking. Arriving at Kirstenbosch in 1919 he took over the directorship of a struggling, six year old botanic garden, yet by the time he retired, Kirstenbosch had been built up into an institution of world renown. He established this Journal, editing it single-handed until his retirement. He founded the herbarium which now bears his name, living to see it grow from a single initial sheet, to over a quarter of a million. Retirement saw no diminution of activity. The first twelve years of retirement were spent surveying the vegetation of Swaziland, and then, when in his eighties, he sat down to write up a 684 page *Flora of Swaziland*, enumerating 2 118 species.

Compton's life was one of creating, building, achieving and succeeding in his chosen field. But it was not wholly dominated by botany. Mountain climbing, literature, music (he was an accomplished pianist), were outlets of abiding satisfaction. Indeed, less than a year before his death, he was indulging in the delights of Cape Town's ballet season, despite suffering from slight deafness, the only serious physical affliction to impair his otherwise vigorous physique. His was a tidy life; what he started, he completed. When he died he left no loose ends, no unfinished works. He had run the race and finished the course.

Robert Harold Compton was born at Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, on the 6th of August 1886, the son of Robert Ernest Compton and his wife Eleanor (born Wilkes). At first, young Robert attended Abbey House School at Tewkesbury. There, at the age of eleven, he had an early, doubtless significant, introduction to botany. It came in the form of a school prize; W. J. Gordon's '*Our Country's Flowers, being a complete guide to the flowers and ferns of Britain*'. After some time he proceeded to Mill Hill School, London, where he completed his

schooling before going up to Cambridge in 1905. Here again, one cannot help noting strong botanical connections, for Mill Hill School occupied a site where the famous Quaker botanist, Peter Collinson, had established his botanic garden and which was later to become the home of another well-known botanist, R. A. Salisbury.

On entering Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1905, Compton commenced his serious botanical career. There he took the Natural Science Tripos (Part I), obtaining a first class pass in 1907. Two years later, he took Part II of the Natural Science Tripos, again obtaining a first class pass but with distinction in Botany—an achievement which led to the award of a Drosier Fellowship in his college. His earliest papers dealt with anatomy and morphology. Later he was much preoccupied with the genetics of right- and left-handedness in cereals and in 1911, attended the 6th International Genetics Conference in Paris to read a paper on this subject. Self-sterility was another topic which received attention before he returned to anatomy and morphology, this time concentrating on seedling structure. Then, in 1914, the Royal Society and the Percy Sladen Trust Fund, sponsored an expedition to New Caledonia and the Isle of Pines. Compton participated in the year-long expedition which brought him into contact with a flora of wonderful diversity and, not unnaturally, caused him to switch his interests to taxonomy. He made just on 2 500 collections, many of them novelties, including two new gymnospermous genera *Austrotaxus* and *Callitropsis*, which he described himself. Compton later remarked that his sojourn in New Caledonia was the happiest year of his life. It was certainly to set the pattern for much of what followed. Born at the height of Queen Victoria's Imperial reign, it was only to be expected that he imbibed something of the spirit of that age; an age which encouraged men to go forth to remote lands to initiate developments and to build from the beginning. New Caledonia had taught him how to make pioneering starts, to conquer new frontiers, to lay basic foundations. So it was to be in South Africa. Henceforth he would forsake the rigorous laboratory work and stimulating conviviality of college life at Cambridge, which had been his whole world.

The dual vacancy at Kirstenbosch and the University of Cape Town, resulting from Pearson's death, must have seemed an irresistible challenge. Compton reached out and took it. Arriving with his family in 1919 (he had married Katherine Askin Sealy in Sydney in 1915), he found the fledgling botanic garden at Kirstenbosch had progressed little in the six years since it had been founded. Yet with faith and hope, though precious little charity from the central government,

Compton and Mathews built a botanic garden of global repute. Together they generated a world-wide interest in the cultivation of South African plants. Again, he was breaking new ground. Compton's contributions to horticulture were acknowledged in 1935, when he received the rare distinction of being made an Honorary Fellow of Royal Horticultural Society.

Demands on his time came chiefly from the day to day administration of Kirstenbosch, as well as shouldering a share of the teaching load in the University of Cape Town's Botany Department. Time available for research was lamentably short, yet he pursued his interest in taxonomy with characteristic vigour. He never attempted a generic revision but instead saw systematic botany in a pioneer phase, being content to describe new taxa where necessary. These amounted to 11 new genera and some 212 new species.

Exploring the high Cape Mountains was a regular weekend pre-occupation; gathering seed to stock the garden and herbarium specimens for the Bolus Herbarium, which, since 1924, had been housed at Kirstenbosch, though remaining the property of the University of Cape Town. Collecting in unexplored areas seemed especially to attract him, so, while undertaking periodic visits to the Karoo Garden at Whitehill, Compton commenced a survey of that district's flora. It was a daunting task, undertaken in trying physical conditions, yet this was the sort of work Compton seemed to thrive on. Arriving by train at either Whitehill or Matjiesfontein, he would stride out across the Karoo for an hour or two before reaching the Witteberg and then ascending its slopes to new collecting areas. Between 1921 and 1930 he collected over 700 species of flowering plants and ferns in the Whitehill district, from which area he described four new genera and forty-nine new species!

Like all his earlier South African collections, they were placed in Bolus Herbarium, then housed at Kirstenbosch. All along, he had maintained that no botanic garden could function without the services of an herbarium in its midst. One can therefore understand his great distress when, at Mrs. H. M. L. Bolus' behest, the University of Cape Town decided to move the Bolus Herbarium from Kirstenbosch to the new Groote Schuur campus, a move which was completed in 1938. The removal of the Bolus Herbarium was undoubtedly the greatest setback Compton ever suffered. Yet with quiet determination he set out to establish a new garden's herbarium. Once again he had to make a fresh start. Lesser men may not have had the physical or moral strength to start a new herbarium: fortunately, Compton did.

In 1937 he reported:—"The purchase of cabinets made it possible . . .

to arrange various collections as the nucleus of a Gardens Herbarium". It was probably the boldest, most important step he ever took as Director of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa. Working weekdays and weekends, the herbarium was built up sheet by sheet until it had become a workable entity. His own collection of books formed the nucleus of the herbarium library and on his death the remainder of his library was bequeathed to the Compton Herbarium.

The founding of the *Journal of South African Botany* in 1935 was another courageous initiative. There had been no satisfactory local medium, open to all contributors, for the publication of research on the South African flora until this journal made its appearance. Unaided, he edited it until his retirement, making contributions to many issues himself.

When he retired in 1953, Prof. and Mrs. Compton settled in Swaziland on their farm Ukutula near Mbabane. Yet again he was to begin another ambitious project, *de novo*. His interest in the vegetation of Swaziland had been aroused in 1947, when he first visited that country. Soon after settling there, the Swaziland Government asked him to initiate a botanical survey of the Protectorate and in 1955 the survey got under way, supported by the British Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. Unfortunately, the withdrawal of financial support in 1966 forced Compton to discontinue his field work in March of that year, although by this time he had already made over 11,000 collections in Swaziland. This material was largely identified at the Botanical Research Institute, Pretoria, where the first set is now deposited.

Shortly after the publication of his preliminary results in 1966, as *An annotated check list of the Flora of Swaziland*, he began work on the text of a full-scale *Flora of Swaziland*, with keys and descriptions. In 1971 Prof. Compton returned to Cape Town, where he lived with his daughter and son-in-law. It was a move which enabled him to make regular visits to the herbarium at Kirstenbosch and thus make real headway on the manuscript of his flora. He was then 85 years of age! Compton's *Flora of Swaziland* was published on the 6th of August 1976, his 90th birthday.

These are but the bare facts of a man's life as a successful scientist and administrator. Above all, he was a most warm-hearted, genial person, an urbane gentleman whose quiet dignity belied a charismatic charm. His respect for nature and all forms of life was paramount. All that was brash, crude or vulgar, repelled him. Intemperate language had no place in his vocabulary. Though very much a man of this century who lived life to the very end with resounding zest, his calm gentle manner recalled a softer more leisurely age. The whole tempo and spirit of his

life is marvellously illuminated in four charming articles written when in his nineties (*Veld & Flora* vols 62 and 63). Here he tells his own story better than anyone else could.

Many honours came to him. He was president of the Mountain Club of South Africa from 1940 to 1953 and was made an honorary life member in 1963. The South African Association for the Advancement of Science awarded him the South African Medal, the Royal Horticultural Society honoured him with the Veitch Gold Medal and the University of Cape Town, where he had occupied the Harold Pearson Chair of Botany for 34 years, conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Science, *Honoris causa* in August 1968.

Comptonella Bak. fil. a New Caledonian genus of the Rutaceae and the South African *Comptonanthus* B. Nordenstam (Asteraceae) are genera commemorating his name, as do the specific epithets of at least a dozen New Caledonian and over twenty South African plants, including *Protea comptonii* and *Erica comptonii*.

On retiring in December 1953, a fine portrait in oils by Captain Douglas Wales-Smith, was hung in the herbarium, where he had spent so much of his time—the collection thereafter being designated the Compton Herbarium, by resolution of the Board of Trustees.

Together, the Compton Herbarium and this Journal, remain his most enduring memorials.

J. P. ROURKE

COLLECTING DATA

1. *New Caledonian collections*

Numbers 1–2500 at the British Museum (Natural History). Field Note books and collecting registers of this period are presently in the Compton Herbarium Kirstenbosch but will shortly be presented to the British Museum (Natural History).

2. *Southern African Collections*

Numbers 2501–32550 at BOL, NBG and K. (The Swaziland Survey commences at about 23,800, with the First set at PRE, Second set at NBG and Third set at K). Registers of this period at NBG.

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1921. The Cultivation of Buchu (with J. W. Mathews). *J. Dep. Agric. Un. S. Afr.*
1921. A Systematic Account of the Plants collected in New Caledonia and the Isle of Pines by Mr. R. H. Compton M.A. in 1914. Gymnosperms. p. 421–434. Pteridophyta. p. 435–462. *J. Linn. Soc. Bot.* XLV and XLVI, 1920, 1921.
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